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BUSINESS

'Touching fish' becomes unusual work philosophy of China's Gen Z

Photo: Illustration/Tom Leung

by **Alice Yan**

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China's Generation Z are encouraging fellow citizens to slack off at work to protest against a culture of working long hours.

Young people in China have recently embraced new 'unofficial' laziness rules in the workplace to protest against a **modern work culture** they believe is far **too demanding without sufficient rewards**.

In a snub to China's rat race and **expectation to work long hours**, Generation Z is calling on their comrades to start slacking off, or as they have dubbed it, "touching fish," or "mo yu."

Among the rules for laziness are doing stretches in the office pantry, using the most toilet paper in the company and filling a thermos full of Chinese tea or whiskey as a desk-side companion, business news outlet Quartz reported.

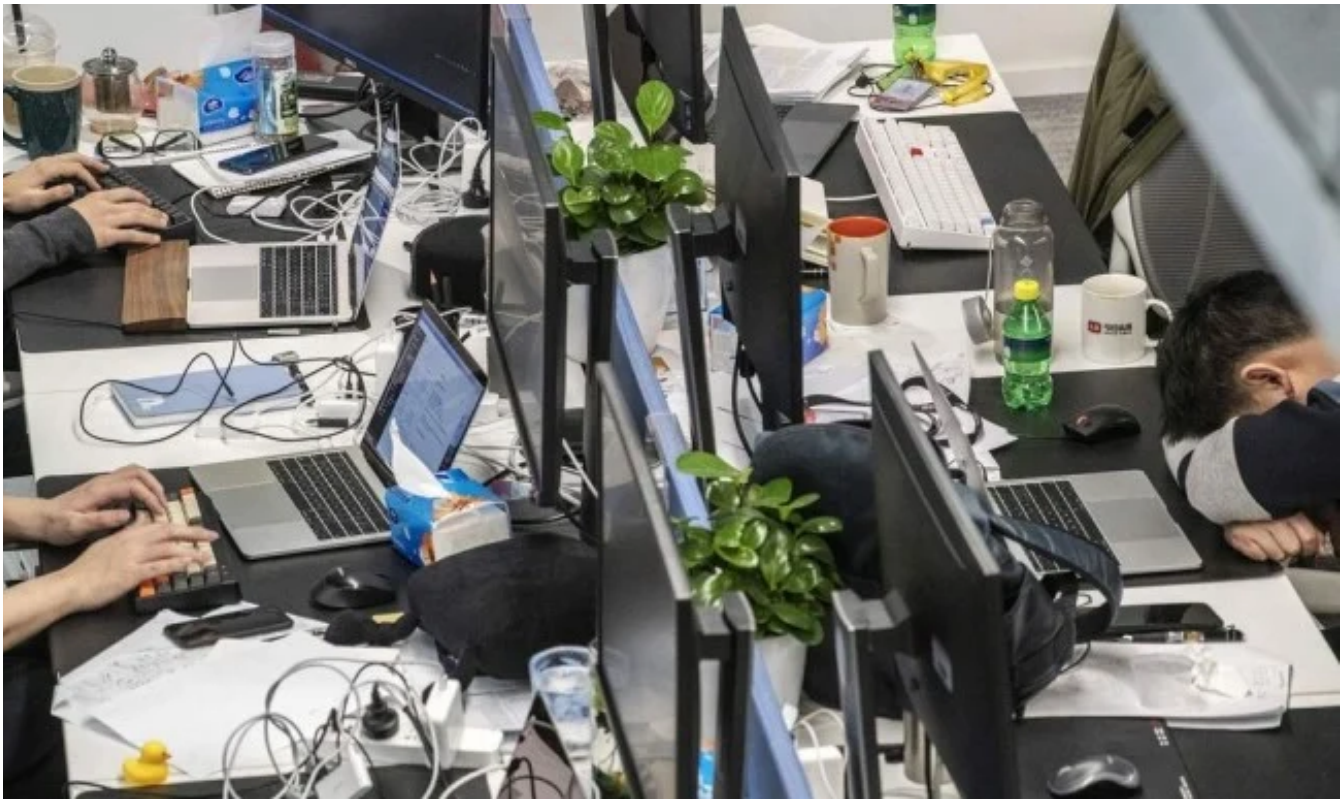
'Touching fish' is borrowed from a Chinese proverb that says, 'muddy waters make it easy to catch fish.' Photo: SCMP/Martin Chan

This philosophy of "touching fish" is borrowed from a Chinese proverb which states, "muddy waters make it easy to catch fish." It means that people should take advantage of a crisis to chase personal gains.

It was especially relevant in 2020 as the country struggled to deal with the coronavirus pandemic and its fallout, especially in its economy.

One of the tips from a user called Massage Bear, who started the movement, wrote on social media:

"Set a reminder on your phone to drink eight glasses of water every day, and leave your workstation every 50 minutes to get that water."



The movement is a reaction to a perception of overwork in China. Photo: Bloomberg/Gilles Sabrie

The Shanghai-based white-collar worker shot to fame in 2020 after posting her "touching fish" philosophy on Weibo, China's Twitter-like platform.

"How hard you work depends on how much money you receive and never be serious about your work," she instructed her followers.

Other rules include delivering medium-quality work, staying in the toilet for a long time and playing games on mobile devices.

The philosophy appears to be gaining a strong following amongst China's young people.

"I 'touch fish' every day and I am happy with it," wrote one user on Weibo.

Generation Z say the laziness trend is a silent rebellion against the culture of working long hours for little reward.

Set a reminder on your phone to drink eight glasses of water every day, and leave your workstation every 50 minutes to get that water.

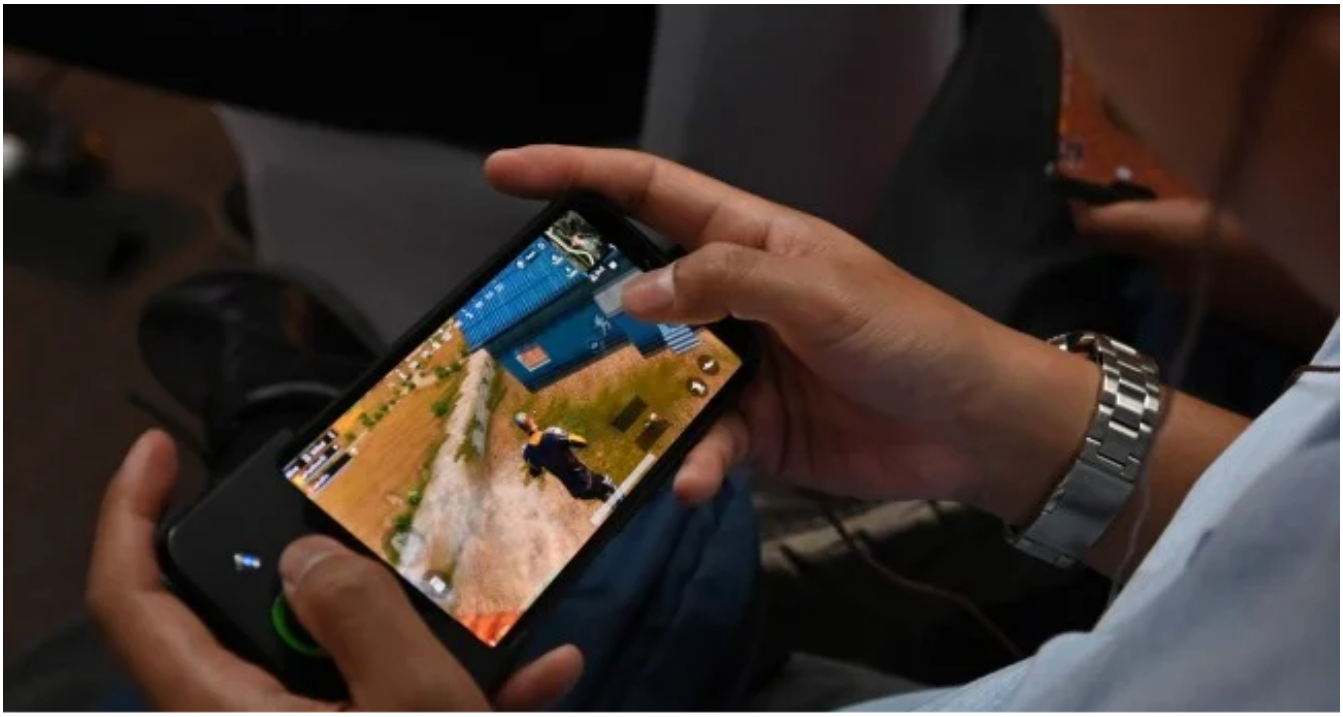
- Advice for "touching fish" from Massage Bear

But it has the potential to backfire and lead to young people being fired.

Allen He, a senior manager at an international financial company in Shanghai, said his employer was not afraid to sack those who were not performing at their job.

"We have new employees every year, some being outstanding but some 'touching fish'," he told *Inkstone*. "Most of us are busy at work.

"Those lazy staff will find a bigger and bigger gap between them and their peers. In the end, they will be eliminated."



Another piece of advice for 'touching fish' is to play mobile games at work. Photo: Shutterstock

Blogger Massage Bear disagreed, writing on Weibo: "Even if my boss scolds me [for 'touching fish'], calls me rubbish or blames me for being not responsible, I will just smile and will never get angry. I will never take an initiative to resign.

If he fires me, I will receive compensation of 'N+1.'"

China's Labour Law stipulates that if a company fires an employee without substantial reasons, it should compensate them with an amount of money, usually the employee's monthly salary times the number (N) of years worked, plus one.

It's no wonder that many employees are thinking of ways to diversify their income sources.

- Jennifer Feng, chief human resources officer from a leading job-hunting website 51job.com

Jennifer Feng, chief human resources officer from a leading job-hunting website 51job.com, said it's common for young people, usually in their 20s, to slack at work, mainly because of their low income and incentives.

"According to our investigation, salaries offered by mainland companies rose at 2% on average this year, with half of enterprises not raising their employees' salaries," she told *Inkstone*.

"It's no wonder that many employees are thinking of ways to diversify their income sources, such as browsing on the internet, giving likes to some online shops or relaying the online product links to earn petty cash," said Feng.

She said while many workers born in the 1970s and 1980s follow the traditional spirit of enduring hardship and working with grit, those born in the 1990s had a very different philosophy.

Generation Z placed a high priority on their own interests and other personal benefits.

"They would quit their jobs easily if they don't like it thanks to their parents' financial support, which is stronger than that of the previous generations," Feng said.

The average wages in Chinese corporations have only risen by 2% this year. Photo: EPA-EFE/Alex Plavevski

Generation Z tends to be more critical of the 996-working culture, which is 9am to 9pm, six days a week, widely adopted by mainland tech giants.

A recent survey by another job website zhaopin.com showed a sense of achievement was the main motivation for young people. It was followed by money, how interesting the work is, and their motivation to do it.

The survey canvassed 3,773 people.

"These characters of young employees have posed new challenges for employers, sometimes testing their tolerance," said Feng.

She said there was a case of a woman in her 20s who asked her boss to permit her to take one-day leave as she was feeling depressed over a relationship break-up. This kind of reason to ask for leave was rarely used by middle-aged employees, said Feng.

It appears the "touching fish" trend will continue into 2021. Young people regard it as a protest against their poor salaries, which they believe is so low that it makes it impossible to achieve their dreams of buying a house or traveling overseas.

"Why does my boss only give me one cent but expects me to pay my ten-cent-worth efforts?" a user posted on Weibo.

"We are not willing to try our best to do our work. Instead, we spare time and energy to do our by-work. Isn't it better than spending all your efforts at work?" wrote another user.

"Once you work very hard, your colleagues will be in bad luck," the blogger, who has over half a million followers on the internet, added, "It's because your boss will find that you are able to do three person's job. In the end, your salary won't get raised, but the boss will ask you to continue to work that hard."

Alice Yan

Alice Yan is a contributor to Inkstone. She is a Shanghai-based social and medical news reporter at the South China Morning Post.

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